

**Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society – An Asia-wide Research Programme**

**IDRC Grant Number – 105788-001**

**IT for Change**

**Start date – 15/3/2010**

**Date of Report – 15/12/2010**

## **1. Introduction**

This Research Programme aims to explore how the concept of citizenship may be useful to study the gendered context of the emerging techno-social paradigm. The opportunities and challenges for women's equality and empowerment in the emerging context need to be framed in a nuanced way, juxtaposing the analysis of gender relations with the broader questions of development, participation and power. The Program is thus an attempt to build a theoretical framework and generate policy directions from the standpoint of marginalised women in the region. It will broaden the conceptual horizon about gender and ICTs, towards a politicisation and radicalisation of the 'access-centred' discourse so that the core feminist question about power, justice and equity can be addressed in its full implications.

### **Program Objectives**

- To understand how emerging techno-social paradigms, shaped by new information and communication technologies (ICTs), recast the citizenship of marginalised women.
- To examine the challenges to and opportunities for women's citizenship as they are shaped by new ICTs in relation to specific social and institutional ecologies.
- To propose ways forward for practice and policy in relation to information and communication domains that place women's citizenship at the centre.
- To build a network of researchers, scholars and policy makers on information society and gender issues in Asia.

## **2. Critical Milestones so far**

The programme began in March 2010 with an initial scoping visit undertaken by IT for Change in select countries in Asia. The visit covered Bangladesh, Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaysia. It was a necessary tool to build the intellectual critical mass needed for research in an area as old as gender and development – where much scholarship already exists in the region but with the imperative we have to expand the field. The information society studies arena is rather nascent in the region. The visits were able to generate interest and curiosity among the activist-academic communities that then served the purpose of a wider dissemination of the call for proposals.

By June, 2010, after the call for proposals, an advisory group consisting of Srilatha Batliwala, Andrea Cornwall, Lisa McLaughlin and Parminder Jeet Singh, assisted by Anita Gurumurthy, the coordinator of the Programme selected, out of the 34 submissions in response to the call for pre-proposals, 7 projects that met the different criteria adequately, representing different but complementing research issues. Although there was money to fund an 8<sup>th</sup> grant, the advisory group voted that we should use the budget for the 8<sup>th</sup> grant to bring the other 7 grantees for a review workshop in 2011.

In July, these 7 potential partners were invited to a workshop to discuss the substance and methodology of the proposed research programme and as a kick-off process to clarify the values and assumptions informing IT for Change's orientation to this process. We wanted to be sure that the community of these 8 possible grant ideas could emerge into a loose network.

The workshop was held between July 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, and provided a space for rich discussions and some intense debates, captured in the report (see [http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/wp-content/GIC\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/wp-content/GIC_Final_Report.pdf))

Contracts have been signed in a staggered manner from August onwards. At this stage, we did encounter some not so unpredictable bottlenecks for a programme attempting to break new ground. The Pakistan partner, Shirkat Gah dropped out citing reasons of human resource non-availability to carry out what they felt was an innovative area requiring special talent and so this left us with 6 potential grantees. Instead of going back to the assessments and ratings to fill this gap, it was decided that the funding for the 7<sup>th</sup> grant would be used for commissioning think pieces from Asia and across the global South, of about 8 to 10 thousand words. The think pieces are intended to bring scholars one by one during the one year of the programme as and when we are able to identify interesting issues.

Further, there was also a procedural issue wrt the India pre-proposal indicating a potential project management risk, and the advisory group was of the opinion that we should not fund this team. It was decided that IT for Change would attempt to fill this gap by soliciting pre-proposals from other competent researchers in India to work on gender and decentralised governance, an issue with tremendous potential for action and policy research in relation to ICTs and network building among women in local governance.

By October, 4 contracts had been signed with Women and Media Centre – Sri Lanka (principal researcher – Sepali Kottegoda), BRAC University – Bangladesh (principal researcher - Sohela Nazneen), Hongking Inmedia (principal researcher – Iam Chong) and APWLD – Thailand (principal researcher – Hsiao Chuan Hsia). Conversations with the Philippine team for a contract with Likhaan (principal researcher – Sylvia Estrada Claudio) and with Binitha Thampi for a possible India based project were initiated.

There was another setback in November, with the Bangladesh team withdrawing on account of what they cited as the non-availability of appropriate cases to study and the inability of some team members to continue for a year.

In December we decided to get in touch with DNet, an organisation in Bangladesh, to invite Ananya Raihan, a research scholar with credibility, to submit a pre-proposal, based on an assessment of the importance of the country for this programme and with the resolve to not let the opting out of the old Bangladeshi team.

As things stand, our teething trouble is behind us. It must be added that from 2 teams – the China-Hong Kong and Thailand-Taiwan teams, we already have the first scoping document, which we are calling the 'state of the art' document, which will pick up and flesh out the context and the hypothesis related to the respective project. However, the India project just started in December, and the Bangladeshi pre-proposal is just being discussed with the new partner we have invited. They will most likely be really behind those who were early starters.

While we go into 2011 with the Sri Lanka, Philippine and India scoping documents just round the corner, we are aware that the time lines are not realistic in terms of the minimum needed to deliver on the project outcomes. Further, some of the partners are undertaking action research and in a single year, the change process is likely to have just begun.

By January, we will have a proposal from DNet in Bangladesh and we hope to have transferred the funds to the 7<sup>th</sup> and last research grants partner.

We have also been able to commission 3 think pieces – from Thailand, Costa Rica and Pakistan in lieu of the 7<sup>th</sup> grant.

All the researchers, grantees and think piece writers, will meet in India for a review workshop on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, where we will also bring important state and NGO sector actors along with academia.

### **3. Project Descriptions**

Below are summaries of the current research projects.

1. *'Empowering women leaders at the local level: translating descriptive representation to substantive representation through ICTs'*. Research team: Binitha Thampi and J. Devika.

The effort of developing a knowledge network is particularly relevant for the state of Kerala in the present precisely because besides inducting a very large number of women into local governance successfully through the 33 per cent reservation, the government has decided to increase the reserved seats for women to fifty per cent for the term starting in 2010. The proposed work falls well within the efforts to use ICTs as effective instruments for furthering women's citizenship. Our earlier research on women's citizenship and their induction into local governance in Kerala throws up important clues about why this may be so. In our interviews with women leaders of village *panchayats* in Kerala of the last term, a common thread that emerged was about the crucial nature of access to information in women's ability to hold their own against the entrenched patriarchal attitudes of both local politicians and officials. In response to such a situation, the deployment of knowledge network may allow for the smoother access to information by putting KILA's training materials online. A second concern of the proposed work would be to specifically add resources to the site that may help in developing the women component plan funds more imaginatively and in reworking the gender status study, which many panchayats have already completed, into more readable texts capable of giving the women in the *panchayat* a sense of collective identity.

2. *'The power to organise and engage: the use of ICTs by women migrant domestic workers' organisations'*. Research team: Hsiao-Chuan Hsia and Philippa Smales (Taiwan and Hong Kong)

The use and effectiveness of ICTs by migrant domestic workers has not yet been researched extensively. Starting from the hypothesis that the effective use of ICTs can enhance freedom of association, collective representation and political engagement of migrant women domestic workers, the research aims at exploring the differentiated use of ICTs by migrant women domestic workers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The two regions present very contrasting situations. In Hong Kong, ICTs are used a great deal to support and organise migrant workers, who are allowed to form unions, and hence, organise themselves politically. In Taiwan, however, migrant workers cannot form unions of their own, and their use of ICTs has not been researched yet. It is hoped that such study could lead to identifying ICTs' potential to organise, empower, and engage migrant workers in collective and political advocacy, while developing policy recommendations for governments' unions and migrant workers' associations to enhance domestic workers' civil participation. The primary research would carry out both structured and unstructured qualitative interviews with individual migrant domestic workers. The strong existing links with domestic worker networks would be used to access a pool of interviewees. Various types of domestic worker associations (registered unions, semi-structured associations and informal social groups) would also be interviewed to obtain information about existing levels of use of ICTs and the limitations on their use.

3. *'Women's online participation and the transformation of citizenship in Hong Kong'.* Research team: *Iam Chong and Oiwan Lam (Hong Kong and Mainland China)*

The research project is based in Hong Kong and Mainland China and looks at what has happened to women's citizenship after the mid-1990s, in post-colonial times in Hong Kong and after the Beijing Conference in China. This is especially relevant in the milieu of ICTs, because of the advances in the new technologies – China has the biggest labour army employed in ICTs, as well as the largest number of ICTs users. Discussions about the China model and the China miracle make such explorations of citizenship particularly pertinent.

The research project explores different dimensions: women's NGOs and individual women activists in the context of post-colonial and authoritarian state projects; the impact of cultural and political globalisations on the way these women frame citizenship; the relationship between the state and civil society. China and Hong Kong's situations differ while still being historically linked.

The study would carry out qualitative interviews to try and understand the development of feminism, leading to its increased institutionalisation in Hong Kong, and in contrast will look at lesbian groups and individual activists. In China, the participants in the research would be a women's issues-related NGO and women bloggers, who might be opinion leaders, activists or dissidents. The researchers hope that the research would help the state-party embedded women NGOs to develop a certain self-reflexivity. They also hope that the findings from the research would contribute to cultivating a self-awareness of developing alternative forms of gender citizenships.

4. *'Women and the New Media in the Margins of the Sri Lankan State'.* Research team: *Sepali Kottegoda, Sarala Emmanuel, Sachini Perrera (Sri Lanka)*

The research project would aim to study two specific initiatives: Our Media Ourselves and the Women's Media Collective. The focus of the study would be the use of new media tools as a means of empowering women as citizens in Sri Lanka. The engagement of women in Sri Lanka with new media is an emerging area of knowledge, both in terms of access to and use of technology by women, as well as in terms of the understanding of citizenship as articulated by women using new media. Within the Srilankan context, the project aims at exploring the way in which new media have provided a transformative platform for women to exercise and renegotiate their citizenship rights, as well as to contribute to discourses on formal citizenship at the local and national levels. The research methodology would involve action research in the form of interviews and focus group discussions with women consuming and engaging with new media. Individual interviews and focus group discussions would be conducted with women working in local government and women's groups working on citizenship issues, who would generate content for the proposed website. Findings from this research would be used for advocacy at policy-making levels, e.g. in the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Science and Technology.

5. *'Strengthening capacities and linkages of civil society groups and academic institutions to promote gender-sensitive and rights-based perspectives through citizens' electoral participation'.* Research team: *Sylvia Estrada Claudio and Ibarra Gutierrez (Philippines)*

The research is based on a citizens' journalism project, involving youth groups, which make use of digital technologies. It involves collaboration with an NGO working on sexual and reproductive rights in 10 slums, six of which were in metro Manila. The rigour of the project would be enhanced and ensured by the presence of Ibarra Gutierrez, who has been the editor of the *Philippine*

*Collegian*, which was the most prominent independent newspaper during the dictatorial regime of the former president Marcos. The project would be documented using self-reflexive methodologies. It would try to understand the role of digital media in empowering young people through health information. In addition, it would also research the way digital media is used in queer politics as well as within identities and coalitional politics that cut across identities and their struggle with the oppressive dominant patriarchal culture. The project is related to capacity building and linking of civil society organisations in the context of greater gender-sensitivity and rights-based perspectives.

6. As described above, the Bangladeshi team decided to withdraw from the programme following difficulties in finding case study organisations that would allow them to explore how ICTs facilitate the way marginalised women in Bangladesh negotiate their citizenship with different actors. In light of the obstacles encountered, they decided that the research they had planned was not viable if they wanted to deliver a high quality output. Even though some of the advisors tried to support them in finding alternative ways to carry on their research, we unfortunately had to accept their decision. We have contacted Ananya Raihan, Executive Director of D.Net and Research fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (Dakha, Bangladesh), who has accepted to undertake a research project for the Gender, Citizenship and the Information Society research programme.

#### **4. Upcoming Plans**

##### **Mid-cycle workshop**

In April 2011, we hope to organise an interim workshop to review the programme. It will most probably happen in Delhi and will bring together the principal researchers, as well as the research teams members, the think piece researchers, donors working on gender, governance and citizenship and the external advisors of the Programme. The objectives and design of the workshop are being discussed and refined now along with the grantees.

##### **Think pieces**

In order to incorporate the experience of external researchers who could enliven the year long research grants with new food for thought, we started collaborating with scholars who are interested in exploring in the intersecting areas of gender, citizenship and the information society. The think-pieces complement the detailed ground level research studies that some grantees are undertaking. Each think-piece will be based on in-depth scrutiny of the information society context from any important vantage. The piece will be part of the body of knowledge built through the programme and will contribute to the creation of a theoretical framework to understand issues of gender and citizenship in the information society from a Southern perspective. While the research is expected to draw from existing resources, it will also require some collection of primary information, e.g. through key informant interviews or mail-based questionnaire. The researcher will provide elements to elaborate a policy or practice model, using a feminist interpretation of the information society. The piece will be sent as final draft by the end of March while the final will be reworked on the basis of the workshop feedback.

So far, three researchers have accepted to collaborate: Farida Shaheed, Director of Research at Shirkat Gah - Women's Resource Centre (Lahore, Pakistan), Margarita Salas, from Sula Batsu (Costa Rica) and Supinya Klangnarong, media activist and vice-chair of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (Thailand). Evangelia Berdou from the Institute of Development Studies (Brighton, United Kingdom) will contribute to the programme at a later stage. She will attend the review workshop and figure out what she is interested in writing about.

## Communication Outputs

An important part of the programme is the generation of a network of learning among the researchers through the exchange of resources. In order to do so, we have created a group email id to facilitate the communication among the partners. We use it regularly to share interesting readings related to gender, citizenship and the information society. The aim is to encourage sharing, coming from all the participants of the programme. Though this internal communication is still nascent, the first weeks are very promising of the future building of stronger ties among the network partners.

During our inception workshop in July 2010, we interviewed some of the grantees about their work and their participation to the programme. The videos have been uploaded on youtube:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtMaOyAl\\_xI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtMaOyAl_xI)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEZTFh0Vcsg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbyi9n8Qmuw>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTRnCLT4hTY>

IT for Change publishes a quarterly bulletin focused on gender and the information society. The upcoming bulletin will be a special issue about the Gender, Citizenship and the Information Society research programme, with excerpts from the report of the workshop of July 2010, as well as from interviews of some of the grantees about their state of advancement, the challenges they are facing, the findings so far, etc.

Furthermore, our website dedicated to the programme (<http://gender-IS-citizenship.net>) is updated regularly with news from the network, resources, collaborative exchanges, etc.

## 5. Outputs at this stage

So far, we have received the 'state-of-the-art' document from two research teams. These pieces are the first deliverable comprising a preliminary literature review that address the research questions, and reveal the state of the field being investigated. They analyse the policy and practice terrain and frame the key assumptions, concepts and questions of the project, building upon the programme's research framework. These documents take from the research proposals but are more referenced and build upon the work completed in the initial stage to identify allied conceptual frameworks in order to inform some initial inferential hypotheses.

The report of our inception workshop has been finalised. This extensive document captures the exchanges that took place in July 2010 on a range of issues and impassioned debates within the workshop context. Apart from the presentation of the grantees' projects, interesting debates that emerged through interventions of resource persons, such as Gita Sen (Indian Institute of Management, Bengaluru, India), and Maya Indira Ganesh and Manjima Bhattacharjya (Association for Progressive Communications, EroTICs, India) are part of this report. (see [http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/wp-content/GIC\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/wp-content/GIC_Final_Report.pdf) )

Our website is the central point of information about the programme. It is being updated regularly, both with the progress on the projects, as well as with the resources circulated among the network partners. Links to the short interviews of some of the participants to the July workshop are also available on the website.

## **6. Concluding Comments**

In the next few months, 3 draft think pieces and 4 state-of-the-art documents will be delivered. As Sylvia Estrada remarked in her experience so far in setting up her project, ground level realities cannot be wished away in doing feminist research, especially if it is of the action research kind. Four out of the six teams have been delayed owing to valid reasons. We do think that a project of this kind is perhaps not easy to execute and wrap up in 18 months and so we will need to look perhaps at an extension.